

[Honesty and Fairness to the Bitter End]

HONESTY AND FAIRNESS TO THE BITTER END

(A Depression Victim Story)

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Henry Iverson Johnson, at one time Augusta's leading undertaker, stands today still bewildered by the onrush of the great economic depression that has reduced him almost to a life of privation. However, unlike thousands of others caught in its aftermath he explains proudly that he is entirely clear of debt.

"I was in the undertaking business in Augusta for forty-one years and during that time I buried 5000 of its citizens. I followed through to the bitter end with my slogan: 'Honesty and Fairness to all.' When I was forced to close in 1936 I paid 100 cents on the dollar and owed no man anything. Now I am an old man of 83 years and absolutely broke."

Those who have known the family in former years experience quite a shock at the drastic changes that have taken place in their living conditions. The old couple are now making their home in a small upper flat in what is no longer considered a choice neighborhood.

A colored woman answered the door bell and told me she knew they would be glad to see me but that she would have to prepare them for my visit. She led the way to the upstairs hall and I could hear her explaining to the two old people that they 2 had company. After a moment or two the woman returned and led me into a large and almost bare room. The entire furnishings consisted of a bed, a dresser, two rockers, one straight chair and a small table. A worn rug was before the fireplace.

As I walked in Mr. Johnson, who is very active for his age was putting on his hat preparatory to going on some errand for the home. When he learned of my mission he said with old-fashioned courtliness: "Please talk to Mrs. Johnson until my return. I shall be back in a few minutes."

True to his word he was away only a very short time and then settling himself in one of the rockers he began musingly:

"I was born May 5, 1857 on one of South Carolina's old plantations over in Colleton County. My father, Rev. Seaborn Johnson, was a Baptist minister, and I was his youngest

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child. My father required my help on the farm when I was not attending the neighborhood schools. When still quite young I entered Cedar Grove Academy, near Bamberg, South Carolina. This school remained open for just a short while and I went to the old Buford's Bridge Academy in Barnwell County. When I was 17 years old I was appointed to teach. Let me see, that was in [1873?].

"As you doubtless know, we were not required to have degrees in those days. They needed instructors so badly that anyone who showed unusual aptitude at their studies could soon become a teacher. No, I never was able to complete a college course for we were going through the unsettled and stirring times of struggle and readjustment³ which followed Sherman's march to the sea.

"Later on I studied under an eminent civil engineer and field surveyor and for a while I followed that profession.

"I belonged to the Hagood Light Dragons during this period and wore the red shirt. We were banded together to subdue riots and uprisings of all kinds and to endeavor to prevent racial conflict. We kept vigilant watch over the surrounding country and labored for the reestablishment of white supremacy.

"And that recalls to my mind the one and only time I was arrested. It was in 1876 and along with 22 others I was taken up and charged with intimidation. We were taken to Charleston, South Carolina to appear before Judge Melton. Without hesitation I told him I was guilty, that in fact I was the leader, and asked him to release the others. The result was the discharge of the whole company.

"My first business venture was a clerkship in a general merchandise store at Buford's Bridge. I stayed there only a short time and then I operated a store for Col. George H. Hoover at Hampton Courthouse.

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"About this time my brother wanted to do farming and merchandising and asked me to go into partnership with him. We were very successful for we had many loyal friends and customers.

"In 1881 we planted enough cotton to realize 100 bales. We had borrowed the money to get started and hoped to be able to pay off all indebtedness by the end of the season. Then came panic.

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The weather was unusually cold and what little we did manage to raise, a storm swept away a part of that. The 100 bales we had visualized dwindled to 17 bales and we were \$1700 in debt at the end of the year. Only one store was still doing business. The farmers were unable to pay and it had to close."

I interrupted with, "That was indeed a terrible blow for an ambitious young man. What did you do, keep on farming?"

"No." He replied. "Sometime during the first part of 1882 I went to Charleston and took a course in undertaking and embalming. At the conclusion of my studies I went to Allendale, South Carolina, and accepted a position in a general merchandise store where they sold coffins and I took charge of that portion of the business.

"On September 4, 1884, I married the eldest daughter of Major William James Gooding and my father-in-law gave me an old horse. I rigged me up a buggy and hauled drummers to nearby towns. I applied everything I made in this manner on the \$1700 debt. I always made those trips at night and returned just in time to open the store. You see, my brother and I had to pay this money and of course we couldn't begin to save anything until we were out of debt.

"While I was in Allendale I met the president of an Atlanta / coffin establishment. He was very anxious to have a branch in Augusta and urged me to open up such a business.

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Finally I consented to attend a meeting of the directors at Atlanta. Mr. Hall introduced me and I said: "Gentlemen, I'm a poor man and I don't have a dollar to invest, but if you want me as your Augusta manager I will do my best to make a success of it." Their reply to this was, 'Mr. Johnson, we want to set you up in business. We will take care of all details and see that everything you need is supplied.'

"Well, what did I have to lose? I owed \$20.00 for the suit of clothes I had on and had 50 cents in my pocket. I thought to myself, 'Nothing Venture, Nothing Have.' So I said, 'All right, gentlemen, I'm ready.'

"The next day the president of the company came back with me to Augusta, and we rented a store on the corner of Ellis and Sixth Streets. I prospered from the beginning, and am still proud of the confidence placed in me by the good people of Augusta."

"Did your family come to Augusta when you opened your business?" I asked.

"No." He replied. "You see my wife had a little business of her own. She handled dress goods and millinery. After I was established for about a year and had gotten a good foothold I moved her and our five children to the flat over the store. We immediately united with the First Baptist Church and all of my children were baptized there.

"By the end of three and a half years I had discharged all obligations to Hall & Company. My business had expanded quite a bit and I decided to look for larger quarters. One of my friends owned a place on Eighth Street. It was in bad repair, but he promised to put it in first class condition if I would rent it. I outlined my plans and he started on the work at once? I was so cramped for space that I decided to move in before the repairs were finished. Lawrence stopped the work immediately and when I tried to get him to finish he flatly refused.

"I declined to be treated in any such manner and hearing that a very desirable piece of property at 123 Seventh Street was for sale, I decided to buy it. I purchased the building

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on a ten-year basis and immediately added \$3000 in improvements. I made the final payment in three years and eight months. I now had clear titles to my place of business in addition to rolling stock consisting of 12 cars, including hearses and trucks, and was averaging 25 funerals a month among the highest class of Augusta people.

“Then came the World War and Camp Hancock was established on the Hill. They needed an undertaker. Two others and myself made bids and one of them got the contract. That really didn't worry me for I had all the business I could handle with the help I had. My boys had gone to the war and I did most of the embalming myself. When the influenza epidemic broke out three of the officers came to me and said:

“Johnson, we have 75 bodies at the camp and the undertaker doesn't have caskets enough to ship the bodies and we want you to take over and help us handle this situation.

“At first I refused emphatically, and Captain White said:

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“ ‘But don't you see that you must help us. This man's credit is exhausted and we are ready to give you a contract.’ I knew conditions pretty thoroughly and told him I would agree to take it for [10?].

“You can't make anything on it at that figure.’ He said impatiently.

“Then I came back at him right straight from the shoulder:

“I have three sons fighting in this war and I will not be called a profiteer. You furnish the trucks to do the hauling and I'll wire for the caskets and superintend the work.’

“Captain White then said somewhat grudgingly. ‘Johnson, you are making a mistake but have it your way. We have a number of embalmers in the camp who will assist you.’

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"I went up to the camp and established a morgue there. I found 35 embalmers among the enlisted men. Selecting about twenty-five of them I went to work, and during the epidemic I shipped 628 bodies without a complaint and saved the government about \$8000 in the transaction.

"No, I didn't continue the work at the camp. I only helped out during the epidemic. I had to get back to my own business which had been neglected for the camp work.

"Had your business begun to fall off?" I asked.

"Not at all.' He replied. "I had all the business I needed but collections were not so good. But don't get the idea that people won't pay the undertaker. They do pay when they have it.

"When the depression hit the country hundreds of people were out of work and business places were closing every day. There was no money to pay insurance premiums and when families were forced to cut living expenses insurance policies were cashed in and dropped. Each person who was forced to take this step meant to renew his policy when times were better.

"But people didn't stop dying during those hard times and they had to be buried. I couldn't refuse to help the people who had made my business and I made up my mind that I would hang on and if the ship sank I would go down with it.

"At the onset of the depression I could have disposed of my business for \$40,000 and walked out with more than \$75,000. But I stayed on, believing the trouble to be only temporary. Then when things got in a bad way I borrowed money from the bank.

"My boys didn't like the undertaking business, they showed no interest and were of little or no help to me. When I saw that I was beginning to lose heavily I went to the bank

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and asked them to take the business for my indebtedness. They refused to do this and I borrowed from the Home Loan Company and paid the bank.

"I was then eighty years old and could see the utter futility of trying to hang on. I wrote to the manufacturers to take my stock and have it sold. I wanted every penny I owed paid and I want to give credit to my friend who is the president of the Imperial Casket Company of [Leesville?], South Carolina. He volunteered to come to my rescue and help me save my business.

"I closed in 1936 and paid 100 cents on the dollar. I had 9 accomplished what I wanted to do. I was clear of debt but I was an old man and broke. However, I had kept my slogan for 41 years and did until the end.

"Yes, I am a member of several fraternal orders. In 1894 I was made a Master Mason in Allendale, South Carolina. When I came to Augusta I transferred my membership to Webb's Lodge. I was made a Royal Arch Mason in 1896 and a Royal and Select Mason in the same year. Five years later I was dubbed a Knight Templar and have filled the highest offices in each of these organizations. I am also a thirty-second degree Scottish Rite Mason and a past patron of the order of the Eastern Star. I also hold memberships in the Junior Order of United American Mechanics and with the Odd Fellows."

"You spoke of educating your children, Mr. Johnson. How many did you have and what are they doing at the present time?" I asked.

"Well, I have two daughters. One of them, Anna [Elise?], was graduated from National Park Seminary (Maryland) in 1912. She is a pianist of great ability and is now married and living in Cincinnati. Lillian Hampton finished at Converse College. She lives in South Carolina.

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"All four of my sons were graduated from the Richmond Academy. The eldest one, recently deceased, attended Sacred Heart College. He was an expert embalmer and lived in Mississippi at the time of his death.

"He served as a volunteer on the Mexican border and went to France with the American Expeditionary Forces in the World War.

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He served as a top sergeant in the aviation Corps and was with the Army of Occupation prior to his return to the States in 1920.

"My next son went from the Richmond Academy to Stone Mountain then to Georgia Tech for two years. When he came home he entered the Medical College and graduated as one of the five honor members of his class. Then he went to Charleston where he won a scholarship for a special course in the Naval Medical College (District of Columbia). He won his diploma and was commissioned by President Woodrow Wilson and assigned to the Oriental Squadron.

"My third son, after leaving the Academy, attended Stone Mountain and Washington and Lee. Later he saw service in France during the World War. He was active in Masonic circles and was associated with me in business until we failed in 1936. He lives in Atlanta at the present time.

"My youngest son is a dental surgeon and lives in Honolulu. He was graduated with honor from the Atlanta Dental College in 1923, and left immediately for Hawaii.

"I have left my views on the causes of the depression until the last and here they are. There were many contributing causes. You see, I am a very old man and I also lived through the panic of 1876. As to the extravagances of the government, history only repeats itself. Then there was the mistake made by many people who could not foresee that inflated property values and previously unknown extravagances would some day

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end in destruction. Prohibitive salaries paid to officials of the government, Federal, State, County and City, at the expense of the taxpayer was another potent factor.

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Still another mistake, equally costly, was the disaster brought about in the following manner: Instead of the government inducing people to stay on the farms, to raise pigs and chickens and plant gardens, they were told to come to town where relief stations were established for them. Almost without exception misery has descended upon them and each has become one of millions of government manufactured paupers.

“And now it is too late for me to do very much about my troubles. At least we are fairly comfortable, even though I am unable to provide what we have. However, it is vastly different with the government. It has both time and money to accomplish complete recovery.”